

Malcolm Morano

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SPECIALIZATIONS	Metaethics, Ethics, Social & Political Philosophy	
COMPETENCIES	Continental Philosophy, 19 th & 20 th Century Philosophy, Epistemology, Philosophy of Language, Philosophy of Technology, Applied Ethics	
EDUCATION	Harvard University: PhD in Philosophy, 2026 (expected) Dissertation: <i>What Is Meaning in Life and Why Does It Matter?</i> Committee: Selim Berker (chair), Richard Moran, Zoë Johnson King My dissertation develops a theory of the question of “life’s meaning.” Whereas the contemporary literature in philosophy and psychology construes meaning as a kind of value our lives can have, I argue that the concept of life’s meaning refers to a way of <i>making sense</i> of life that can guide us in living it. This analysis changes the way we think about meaning’s relationship to the foundations of ethical thought, and provides us with new resources to understand the common claim that there is a problem of meaning in liberal modernity. I aim to develop both of these threads: locating the rational source of the need for meaning, and casting light on the possibilities for renewed forms of liberalism to meet this need. Fordham University: BA in Music and Philosophy, 2014 Summa Cum Laude	
PUBLICATIONS & MANUSCRIPTS	A paper on meaning and understanding (currently Revise-and-Resubmit at <i>The Philosophical Review</i>) A paper on meaning <i>in</i> life, the meaning <i>of</i> life, and the ethical framework of liberalism (currently under review) “Virtues and Reasons: Solving the Problem of Priority,” <i>Dialogue</i> , 2016. “The Role of Religious Reasons in a Liberal Democracy,” <i>Res Cogitans</i> , 2014.	
FELLOWSHIPS, AWARDS & HONORS	Graduate Fellowship in Ethics, Edmond & Lily Safra Center, 2025-2026 Francis Bowen Prize, Harvard University, 2025 Awarded annually to the best essay in moral or political philosophy.	

FELLOWSHIPS,
AWARDS &
HONORS (cont.)

Ethics Pedagogy Fellowship, Edmond & Lily Safra Center, 2022-23
Media & Design Fellowship, Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning,
2022-23
Certificate of Distinction in Teaching (x4), Derek Bok Center, 2020-21
Phi Beta Kappa, Fordham University, 2014
Jane B. Aron Memorial Prize in Philosophy, Fordham University, 2013

PRESENTATIONS &
CONFERENCE
PARTICIPATION

“The Puzzle of Intelligibility and the Meaning of Life”
Southwest Graduate Philosophy Conference, Arizona State
University, 2025
Graduate Conference on “Meaning in Life,” University of
Tennessee-Knoxville, 2025
Comments on Sukaina Hirji, “The Relational Stance”
Political Epistemology and Oppression Workshop, Princeton
University, 2025
“The Role of Religious Reasons in a Liberal Democracy”
18th Annual Undergraduate Philosophy Conference, Pacific
University, 2014
“Virtues and Reasons: Solving the Problem of Priority”
Undergraduate Philosophy Conference, San Diego State University,
2013
Undergraduate Philosophy Conference, University of Puget Sound,
2013

TEACHING

Primary Instructor, Harvard University
Phil 97: Tutorial I: Finding Meaning in Modern Life, Spring 2025
Phil 97: Tutorial I: Existentialism: Old and New, Fall 2024
Phil 98: Tutorial II: Varieties of Moral Realism, Spring 2024
Recitation Instructor/Teaching Assistant, Harvard University
Phil 169: Nozick’s *Philosophical Explanations*, Spring 2024
Phil 159: Epistemology, Spring 2022
Phil 14: Morality and the Good Life, Fall 2021
Gen Ed 1015: Ethics of Climate Change, Spring 2021
Phil 178z: Inequality, Fall 2020
Primary Instructor, Harvard Summer School, Pre-College Program
Phil P-11181: Perspectives on the Meaning of Life, Summer 2025
and Summer 2024
Govt P-16112: Truth, Lies, and Democracy in the Digital Age,
Summer 2025 and Summer 2023

TEACHING (cont.) Research Assistant, Harvard University, Spring/Summer 2024
 Assisted Jeff Behrends in course development for a Gen Ed course
 on the meaning of life.

Ethics Bowl Coach, Harvard University, 2022-2023

Glassblowing Instructor, GlassRoots, 2016-2018
 After-school program for at-risk youth in Newark, NJ.

Philosophy Tutor, Fordham University, 2011-2014
 Tutored fellow undergraduates in introductory philosophy classes.

SERVICE Graduate Student Representative, Harvard Philosophy Department, 2023-
 2025

Climate Working Group, Harvard Philosophy Department, 2019-2021

Syllabus Diversity Working Group, Harvard Philosophy Department, 2020

GRADUATE PhD, Harvard University (* indicates audit):
 COURSEWORK Metaethics (Selim Berker)
 The Philosophy of Bernard Williams* (Richard Moran)
 Kant's Ethical Theory* (Christine Korsgaard)
 The Good* (Christine Korsgaard)
 Independent Study: Robert Nozick (Selim Berker)
 Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics (Jimmy Doyle)
 First-Year Colloquium: Value (Selim Berker)
 Second-Year Paper Preparation Course: "Can We Trust Experts in an
 Unequal Society?" (Mark Richard)
 French Social Thought, Durkheim to Foucault (Peter Gordon)
 German Social Thought, Nietzsche to Habermas* (Peter Gordon)
 Historical Injustice (Emilio Mora)
 Philosophy and Literature: Proust (Richard Moran)
 Self-Knowledge and Reflection (Richard Moran)
 First-Year Colloquium: Mind (Susanna Siegel and Bernhard Nickel)
 The Later Wittgenstein* (Richard Moran)
 The Later Wittgenstein* (Warren Goldfarb)
 Frege, Russell, and the Early Wittgenstein* (Warren Goldfarb)
 British Empiricism (Alison Simmons)
 Fundamentals of Logic (W. Hugh Woodin)

REFERENCES

Selim Berker
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Moral Philosophy, and Civil Polity,
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Zoë Johnson King
Associate Professor of Philosophy,
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Richard Moran
Brian D. Young Professor of
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Jeff Behrends (teaching reference)
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Associate Senior Lecturer in
Philosophy, Harvard University
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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

The meaning of life is often thought of as the kind of issue that keeps people awake at night, and can lead them to radically change their lives. Yet mainstream philosophical ethics has surprisingly little to say about it. My dissertation aims to change this, grappling with the metaethical and political implications of the search for meaning through the development of a theory that situates meaningfulness in its relation to other, more well-understood ethical concepts.

I argue that to find meaning in one's life is to find one's life to be *normatively intelligible*—that is, to find one's life to make sense in a way that justifies living it. This is at odds with the dominant approach in contemporary philosophy about life's meaning—which I call *the MIL approach*. This approach follows Susan Wolf's suggestion that we can theorize “meaning *in* life” as a kind of value that our lives can have, and safely disregard “the meaning *of* life” as an irrelevant metaphysical concept. But I argue that the MIL approach distorts the concept of meaning, and present an alternative picture in which meaning *in* life and the meaning *of* life are much more closely related. In this picture, life's meaning is a matter of its intelligibility, and is connected with attempts to *understand* our activity of living, rather than to somehow make it better. I then show some of what this new framework allows us to see, through discussing two of its upshots—the first in metaethics, and the second in political philosophy.

The metaethical upshot is that the search for meaning creates its own requirement to understand the world normatively. This emerges from observations regarding what it takes to live *reflectively* and *authentically*. To live reflectively, one must “step back” and seek to understand one's activity of living. But to live authentically, one must understand this activity *as one's own*—that is, as the activity in which one is presently engaged. This constrains the ways we can make sense of our lives, if we are not to become alienated from our present activity; in particular, it constrains us to understand our lives in a way that justifies them, or rationalizes our endorsement of them—that is, it constrains us to *find meaning in them*, on my analysis of meaning. This argument provides us with a basis for normativity that locates meaning, along with other concepts historically favored by existentialists, at its foundation.

The political upshot is that the culture of liberalism creates the conditions for its participants to experience predictable crises of meaning. This emerges from an observation about the scale at which we interpret our activity of “living.” If we interpret our living merely as our present activity, then we only need to understand particular life elements in a justifying way. However, if we interpret our living as our entire life, or as living *itself*, then our justificatory understanding will need to capture much more. I argue that these two poles of the scale correspond to the meaning *in* life and meaning *of* life distinction, and use this to cast the prevailing MIL approach in a new light: as part of an attitude towards living which only seeks to understand it at the level of individual elements, rather than to understand our lives as a whole (or as parts of an even larger whole). This attitude, I claim, is a result of the liberal project to cordon off a *public* part of our lives that is governable and answerable to others, from a *private* part of our lives that is fully the province of each individual. In doing so, liberalism privatizes the affair of making sense of one's life as a whole.

Liberalism thus affords us important opportunities for self-definition, but also runs several risks. It risks saddling us with a pervasive sense that our activities do not add up to a coherent whole. It risks leaving us with justifications (for different elements of our lives) that conflict with one another. And it risks asking too much of us as lonely, independent, and responsible selves. Many people may feel unable to bootstrap themselves into their own justifications of their lives, desiring a broader story justifying the life of the species or the community of which they are a part. All of these risks point to the possibility that liberalism as a political and ethical order may not provide many of us with sufficient resources to justify our lives. The task then, is to rethink how liberalism fits into a holistic conception of life's meaning, and I close with some suggestions for how a Deweyan conception of liberal democracy might do just this.